SIXPENNY SONGS

JOHN PUDNEY

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SIXPENNY SONGS

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SPRING ENCOUNTER
OPEN SKY
DISPERSAL POINT
BEYOND THIS DISREGARD
SOUTH OF FORTY
TEN SUMMERS
ALMANACK OF HOPE
SELECTED POEMS
COMMEMORATIONS

John Pudney

SIXPENNY SONGS

The maid was in the garden
Hanging out the clothes,
There came a little blackbird
And snapt off her nose.

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

First published 1953

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Printed in Great Britain by
UNWIN BROTHERS LTD, WOKING AND LONDON
for JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD, LTD,
28 Little Russell Street, London, W.C.1

DEDICATION

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for

H.S.M.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

★

The author gratefully acknowledges those who gave some of these Sixpenny Songs a first performance, Mr. Wilfred Pickles who broadcast some of them and the editors of *John O' London's Weekly*, *Lilliput*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry Review*, *The Spectator*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Tatler*, *Time and Tide*, and *The Times of India*.

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THE KISS CONSIDERED

If I kiss you tonight
Will you hate me for ever
With nothing to write
But a note in a diary
A note of enquiry
If I was right
To kiss you and sever
The bright from the fiery
The wise from the clever
Myself from your sight?

LAMENT

Sooner be late with hate than sorry.
Wasn't I right to hate her so?
He and his idling loaded lorry
And she in the meadow, the meadow, the meadow.

See all her shape where the bruise of the grass is.
Wasn't I right to hate her so?
A step off the road where his lorry passes.
O she in the meadow.

Sooner know all and sooner settle.
Wasn't I right to hate her so?
Sooner him sting my breast with a nettle
Than she in the meadow, the meadow, the meadow.

WINTER FANCY

As tawny as a scudding hare
Against the snow
My fancy runs,
Alerted in the winter air,
Tawny and warm
And safe from guns.

My wary fancy circles wide
Like any hare
At this sparse time:
And sniffs no danger in the pride
Of gossamer
And silver rime:

Sees only beauty, not the eye
A killer trains
Upon his sights:
And does not choose his time to die,
Loving all day
And fearing nights.

SPRING

In this night of stealthy pleats and moon-pale creases
What does the little white bitch who lives on pieces
Fretted with gravy in a dish?
Could it be that she comes to the bluebell clearing
Of her own sweet wish?

Could it be that she lost her interest in the petting
And the doggy talk, just as the sun was setting,
Just after licking clean her bone?
Did she leave these comforts for the bluebell clearing
Just to be alone?

Hurry, mistress, through the dark of night all pleated.
Call to the little white bitch who has so cheated
Cushions and loving care and locks
To find moon-creases in the bluebell clearing
And a red dog fox.

QUINCE HARVEST

Bright, bitterest, yellowest, untimely crop,
Breathing a frolic ripening rottenness,
Though the trees
Go bare, filling the air
With sweet hilarious devil-may-care
Despair and ease,
As your poor over-burdened branches freeze!

Harvesting quinces in the butt of the year
Returning to myself,
With the pang of the frost
Entering the craven bone—
Mine and the trees' bent skeleton
On which this tardy crop is grown—
Returning to myself I am not lost.

ANTHONY CROW

Anthony Crow is home to his bed:
And the long long night of the village listens.
Anthony Crow and his wife hold hands,
As still as frost in the hedgerow glistens.

Anthony, Anthony, time you come home,
Each sleepless crone in the village mutters.
Pity you ever was gone to the war,
Whisper the know-alls behind the shutters.

Look sharp and love her, Anthony Crow,
And maybe she'll soon get her mind off the other.
Plenty there be that's all in the know.
Told your mother and told her mother.

Still as the midnight Anthony waits
Holding her hand, the two of them dreaming
Each of another who doesn't belong
To the cold room and the old, old wrong.

BIRTHPLACE

The nursery boast
Among the teacups uttered, as the hunt
Went squelching over fields of buttered toast:
Some day I'll fly about with magic power.
Some day I'll wear a peak cap back to front
And travel at five hundred miles an hour.

O brave hallo'ing huntsmen, lost to me,
While at five hundred miles an hour I fly.
O boastful rattle of a nursery tea
Lost in an unadventurous town sky.

Come, little ghost,
Come, pressurised in this brief dream. Swoop down
To justify the solemn nursery boast.
Follow the lost line of the magic hunt
Over the butter-fields all turned to town.
Imagine that your cap's on back to front.

THE MIDNIGHT ROOSTER

Within the chilly darkness of some roost
Flanked by his hens, a brave untimely cock
Crows midnight with a voice of punctual zest,
Austere as any churchyard clock.

His eyes see nothing of the moon-mazed fields
Subdued in the quick tyranny of frost,
Stricken and deaf to his deluded cry,
His cause forgotten, lost.

Untimely as the cock that spoke for Christ,
He wakes his rivals' consciences to spread
False news to all their sleepy roosting hens,
Till every cock in England wakes the dead.

IN THE FLAT SHIRES

Smiling like spring across the plain,
With all the skies in her eyes goes Jane.
A scud of rain does Jane no harm—
With a fellow on each arm.

I see her kiss the one, and then
The other tries, in the way of men:
And coquetry comes into play,
In the rain, in the eternal way.

As each chap sees the high wide sky
Caught there, astounded, in her eye,
Larks soar and flutter up from him
Far beyond his flat earth's rim.

How do I know the one in the rain
With all the skies in her eyes is Jane?
Because of the women who love no more,
Who say *That's her! The village whore!*

AUNTS WATCHING TELEVISION

The aunts who knew not Africa
But spoke of having been to Weymouth in the spring—
Not last spring but the year the lilac was so good—
Who never saw prize-fighters in a ring,
But could recall a fox-hunt in the neighbourhood.

Two aunts who never went abroad,
Nor travelled far in love, nor were much wronged, nor sinned
A lot—but for such peccadillos as to damn,
With tiny oaths, late frost or some chill wind,
Slugs at the dahlias or wasps at homemade jam.

Two aunts who, after silences,
Spoke knowingly of angels passing overhead:
But who prayed little and slept well, were worried less
By death than weeds: but hoped to die in bed,
Untouched by magic or by economic stress.

This age's beneficiaries
For whom our century endows this box of dreams,
Conferring prize-fighters, dancers of unimaginable grace,
Glimpses of Africa, of football teams,
Of statesmen, of the finish of a classic race.

Vestals of the impalpable,
Dazed by its prodigality, by acrobats
On bicycles, by lovers speaking Shakespeare's lines,
Mazed by murders, by speeches from democrats,
Wooed by cooking hints and the Paris dress designs.

Flirt on, soft spinsters, flirt with time.
Order the crowded hours, vicariously tranced.
Know Africa and judge which prize-fighter was hurt,
How well the latest ballerina danced,
How cake, or love, was made. O flirt, my two aunts, flirt!

DARK LADY

Dark lady with sonnets upon your brow,
Sonnets for some alley Shakespeare to write down,
How come you into Piccadilly, how
Come to live on the town?

Is it because the garnets in your eyes
So smouldered they broke a tractor-driver's heart
In that clay shire where sin in the open dies,
Where scandal's the last art?

Did village tongues bequeath that tragic rose
Of yours? Homely voices, unforgiving,
Who never spoke of loved ones only of those
No longer living.

Dark lady of too much love, long since lost
To a poet who shirked both harrow and plough
From Epiphany into Pentecost,
How much are sonnets now?

TRIOLETS OF THE FOUR WINDS

EAST

The wind's in the east
And his arrows are keen
Though winter has ceased.
The wind's in the east
Piercing mankind and beast
Though the fields are now green,
The wind's in the east:
And a king seeks a queen.

NORTH

The north wind is proud
And rides a high horse
With his head in a cloud
The north wind is proud:
And his hoof beats are loud
As his language is coarse.
The north wind is proud,
Yet he soon spends his force.

WEST

The wind's in the west
And wide is the sea.
O the heart has no rest
The wind's in the west.
With the urge of his quest
Will he enter his plea.
The wind's in the west
And a rover is he.

SOUTH

The south wind caresses
A strand of dark hair
With a handful of guesses.
The south wind caresses
The darkest of tresses.
O lady, beware!
The south wind caresses
With so fine an air.

THESE WERE NOT ANGRY PEOPLE

These were not angry people, never knew
How to weight words with hate, and were surprised
To find their words so weighted and so few.
A few dark blasphemies they recognised:
But these were often said and little prized.
Their temper was not easy to construe.
Cold sober would they fight, without blood lust,
Or giddy calls to valour, with their eyes
Wide open, clean convinced their cause was just,
Skilled in the craft of war but never wise
In tyranny, intolerant of lies
Quick to forgive but not too quick to trust.
Not angry people, in their battle heat
Longing for home in some suburban street.

TO VICTORIA AND HER SNOWDROPS

Solemn as nuns and sprightly as Monday laundresses
Victoria's snowdrops offer a green-white smile.
Never did I see a more distinguished gathering,
Victoria, show more guile.

So beguiling are your green-white nuns and laundresses,
Gathered together, Victoria, with such skill,
That I'm as silly with spring in the midst of London
As a tufted goat on a green hill.

WHEN YOU HAVE TOLD ME ALL

When you have told me all there is to fear:
The subtler threats kept under lock and key
By the prim experts to whom death is dear,
In a bleached land, a poisoned curdling sea,
A half-jammed message for the deafened ear
Whispering only death delayed. In me
You'll find, I hope, no victim, my dark friend,
With whom to share your triumph's squalid end.
For I've seen Anna with her children go
Fearless as April wind. I've seen man die
And falter when the touch of death was slow.
Anna has seen this too. You need not lie,
Dark friend, such is the pity we must know
On the long climb to God, Anna and I.

RECALLING THE VANITIES

. . . man, that bears about him his mortality
St. Augustine.

You might have said he wore
Love's saintly dress
No less
Than the mortality he bore
With all his burdens so
Deftly, with all
The small
Vanities he carried with blithe show.

I saw it after they had carried the hay,
The old blind wains behind a tractor doddering, creaking,
I saw the thunder come and hasten the end of the day,
The last of an era. I heard men speaking
No longer of fly or root, of seed or pest,
But of how much the live and dead stock fetched at the sale,
And there was no more heartbreak in their zest
Than zest in their ale.

I saw the fields that would never crop again,
The haywains split for firewood and the tractor rusting.
I saw the new masters swarming in gumboots in the rain
Indifferently plotting the new era, trusting
To blue prints stained by tea spills and the assent
Of sub-committees whose tobacco-tainted breath
By Eazle Wood and by Coldharbour went,
Regularising death.

Would it ever be the same again, the same
Farmsteads and cottages sending their men to Agincourt:
Men who at the ends of the earth recalled the name
Of Coldharbour or Eazle Wood, who bought
Strange shiny trifles for red-faced girls who ran
To early milkings, and at harvest rode the loaded wains?
Love all lost in the development plan
Of the lovers' lanes?

LOVE OF COUNTRY—TWO

Five feet down are the roots of concrete
Of Eazlewood Crescent, Coldharbour Way,
Plaza Parade, the shops on the corner
All go five feet into clay.

Five feet down are the roots they fought for,
And men died dreaming of Plaza Parade.
Womenfolk clung to bombed Eazlewood Crescent
Through raid after bombing raid.

SONNET FOR A RARELY CELEBRATED HARVEST

Autumn be prodigal with nuts: those stout
Green-jerkin yeoman cobs on lissom boughs,
Noble heraldic acorns crunched by sows:
Sleek piebalds for the schoolboys' conker bout,
Be kind with this shy harvest that allows
So little husbandry and drops in doubt.
With enigmatic stealth let walnuts fall
Furtive as traitors in their flaking skins:
And spiky chestnuts when the frost begins
Its hostile occupation over all,
When nights find out old bones and older sins
And squirrels chuckle as they count their haul.
Let nut-harvest, unsung, rich, unrenowned,
Find me with teeth and every kernel sound.

VALEDICTION FOR A BRANCH RAILWAY

The dog-rose in the valley hedge,
Yew and wild cherry on the flinted down
Marked the course of packhorse and of pilgrimage
And the waggoners' tracks to market town.

Dog-rose and yew and cherry too;
High, windy sheep-wolds; fields of moody grain;
Farmhouse orchards; yellow water-meads, and blue
Cabbage acres mark the course of the train.

Steam symbol of an age which meant
Benefits to be lasting; and which lay,
Through the counties or the darkest continent,
A regular solid permanent way.

Join now the legendary charms,
Recalled by place name or by tavern sign.
Soon will *Station Road* or *The Platelayers Arms*
Be the last record of the valley line.

THE SOLDIER
(A GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION)

The heart that quailed at Christ upon the cross
Wore but the common uniform of man who sees
His fellows hung on trees.

A soldier of the occupying force,
A youngster almost disciplined to watch man die,
Yet not man crucify.

Whose heart wears many tunics through the years
To guard the gallows of mankind: but ever quails
To see mankind or God hung from the nails.

YESTERDAY'S LAUGHTER

Yesterday's laughter lingered on the wind
Which stained the sky with a bruise and brought the snow
Like a liniment to the aching body.
I did not know
How good that laughter was, how it would descend
Flake-like, upon the aching hours of today's
Tyres crunching toward a journey's unwanted end.

Yesterday's laughter lingered on the wind
As it stiffened the country roads and froze the ruts,
As it drove the village gossips off their corners
Sheering the guts
Of working man, of homing child, of harnessed beast;
Slurring them all with its indiscriminate zest,
Silvering the tallest outline and the least.

Yesterday's laughter lingered on the wind
Which carried the North Sea in with me and spoke
A bulletin for the frozen and the drowned:
And then awoke
What was too frail to know its strength, what was mere
snow,
Tender and yet encompassing the earth and air.
Yesterday's laughter was so.

The gypsies and their seven rough horses
Are back by London's boundary, between
The filling station and the traffic lights
Where grass on the verges still grows sweet and green.

They bring new clothes-pegs, but also magic
To the houses and gardens in tidy rows
Where everything is known and allowed for,
Where, sweet and green, the packeted lawn seed grows,

Where patent clothes-pegs are bought from Woolworths,
Where television brings the evening grace,
Where that sign about London's boundary
Even among bright hoardings takes pride of place.

Here the soap-soft hands are read by palmists.
Here good or evil fortune at the gate,
With clothes-pegs, dangerously beckoning,
Trades the terrible traffic of luck and fate.

Here naughty children are warned of kidnap,
Changelings disguised by artful hedgerow stains,
Carried off, rustled through shady counties
By means of seven rough horses, never trains;

Comforted not by electricity,
But charcoal fires and water from a pond,
Laughing darkly at every motorist
Between the suburbs and the back of beyond.

Close your eyes and cross a palm with silver.
Close your doors and keep your children still.
In spite of Woolworths, buy some clothes-pegs.
For magic has crept down from over the hill.

From beyond the distant filling station,
The far traffic lights, the last bus stop,
The gypsies and their seven rough horses
Have come, for magic, and sweet green grass to crop.

On their way to town the hedgehog-eaters,
Coming from nowhere, idle and wild,
Peddle wooden clothes-pegs and awaken
In every heart the pangs of a naughty child.

THE FOOTBALL MATCH

Now let the blithe fierce frolic take control
Of doubt and destiny. For this brief span
Of stress and conflict I am partisan,
Wearing the colours, sure of gain and goal.
Now man is stripped of economic man.
Scruple and prejudice may flee the soul
To be confined by touchlines. Now declare
The innocent strict discipline of play
And let a whistle rule the guileless day.
Now, unrepetitive as birds through air
The patterned fancies of the game array,
Boy's fleetness, man's sagacity, that flair
The sweet immortals cheered in Attic sun
Where games immortally were lost and won.

The fish I caught in the Spanish Main
Was a wahoo as thick as your thigh,
Took five of us men to kill it on deck,
Took thirty minutes or more to die.
And what did I hear the fellow say
Who was running the show for millionaires?
Do they still fish shrimps out of Bawley Bay?
And boil 'em afloat down Gravesend way?

Caribbean sun on the huge wahoo!
Conch-shell isles in a glitter of haze!
Shrimp needs rain just like land do
The grey voice grates from the grey wet days,
The voice that spits at Tilbury Ferry,
At the Ship and Lobster at Denton too,
Shrimp's no go till after the cherry.
Where Pocohontas lies on a hill,
And all the sea traffic of London rides,
Where the bricks and mortar cease to spill,
Where the orchards blow in sight of the tides,
There come the shrimpers from Bawley still.

So must I come to the Spanish Main,
To black boys grinning and more lines spinning,
Trolling for huge wahoo again,
Thick as your thigh for millionaires,
Just for a sniff of Sea Reach in the rain,
Where the smell of the sea is just beginning
But thousands of river smells remain.

O conch-shell isles and Caribbean sun!
Where the lord fish strike and the Gulf currents run!
How long did I dream of the glitter and gold
Of a long line spun
For a huge wahoo?
Only to remember, only to be told
How the cherry blows in sight of the tides,
How the shrimp needs rain, just like land do,
Where the grey sea traffic of London rides.

THE RATIO

They were not speaking of God in the hangar
But of a ratio
Between what they had built and natural forces,
That everlasting cast by man
Between the unknown and known resources.
And they spoke humbly, as Phoenician sailors
Or the shipbuilders of Tyre,
As they talked of stress and the fatigue of metals.
To God they did not aspire.

Yet there was some of the fear of God in every one,
In the echoing hangar or on the airfield where the choir
Of larks lifted as blithely in their sweet element
As dolphins once in the water rolled in fun
For navigators setting sail for an unknown continent
Beyond the sun.

FUCHSIAS

Unspellable, unsmellable,
Gaudy, bawdy
Blossoms that droop and drop:
For which my fingers crave,
To fondle and deprave,
To pop:

Uneatable, unbeatable
Glory, gory
Scarlet and puce and plum:
To prance a saraband
Between the finger and
The thumb.

SONG OF GRUB STREET

In Grub Street may be worms and moles
Who delve and snuffle through the night
In print-black alleys by St. Bride's
With tales that never see the light:
And there are noble souls.

Where Samuel Johnson stomped along
Are prophets shrill with inky lips
Who feed the night with policy
And dark advice and racing tips:
And there are men of song.

O east of Temple Bar the street
Gleams bright with luck and muck and gold.
Dreaming on desks or tavern stools
Are fools who know that life is sweet,
And men who won't be sold.

Bouverie Street and Dorset Rise
Slope down to the tides of the sea,
And the soulful sigh for wider worlds,
Cramming their worlds to column size.
But souls, there are, range free.

Where trains puff up their cloudy prayers
Where Grub Street ends beneath St. Paul's
Are men who raise a glass and tell
How the world wags within four walls.
But the wide world is theirs.

THE WIND BAG

Why don't you go on talking, talking,
For ever and always, and keep my heart awake,
She said as the year fell dead.
Why don't you stop your talking, talking,
For ever and always, and let my poor heart break,
She cried—O how she cried—
Before the new year died.

CAROL IN A TIME OF DOUBT

Though words wear thin,
Our poets sign of death,
Unready pens fill in
The line marked *next of kin*.

On this white day
Of winter in our land
The holly spray
Shall blossom in your hand.

A child's small breath,
All silver in the frost,
Shall let you smile at death,
All love not lost.

CANDLEMAS

The Weald sky cools like a promise,
The magic evergreens are still,
On this night when sprout-kale Candlemas
Falls between hill and darkening hill.

All puggy, the Wealden sallow
Clay curdles, between thaw and freeze.
Yet those smallest sounds of blood and mud
Mutter beneath the magic trees.

Evergreen, evergreen magic
Guard us all in the cooling light;
While through the lifeless, leafless trees,
Drift down the ghosts of Saxon night.

TO MY TAME PSYCHIATRIST

At long last then, dearest decider
Who quoted the odds with such precision
So that all the chances were as known as city prices,
Your victim comes to a decision.

The only chance you could not offer
Ever, as a definite quotation,
Was the heart's frailty or, shall we say, its loyalty
To its own sweet damnation.

Broker dear, your victim has stumbled
Out of market place altogether,
Abandoning the way things should be done, to end the day
Golfing amid the gorse and heather.

SOON WILL BE BRYONY

Soon will be bryony by the hedgerows
And tufted vetch and travellers joy.
Soon it will be another year
Since she found her gentle boy.

Soon will be cuckoopint by the hedgerows
Goutweed, bugloss and nipplewort.
Soon it will be another year
Since he gave her back a thought.

Soon then will be dog roses, dog roses,
With gentle and pink tenderness:
Heartsease too, but not for she
That let the dog thorn tear her dress.

THE ROYAL HATSTAND

The royal hatstand Mrs. Tilling had
Was never used when I was still a lad.
A stand, she said, *to take the hats of kings*
Must not be used for ordinary things.

So dusted, in the hall, it stood quite bare
And if a caller hung an object there,
Good Mrs. Tilling cried: *Take that thing down.*
That stand may well have borne a monarch's crown.

When Mrs. Tilling died in this belief
The auction sale did much to temper grief.
A bidder said: *I'll take away the thing.*
He was a crownless hatless Balkan king.

A TWENTIETH CENTURY VALEDICTION

I've got new weapons, mother, in my pack,
As good as money can buy
To improve my chances of getting there and back.
Mother, don't cry.

Everything's improved, mother, since last time:
Methods can be relied upon:
Much better fire-power, range and rate-of-climb.
Mother, don't take on.

God rest your soul, mother and mine. With arms
Good training and plenty of spares,
We'll win hands down—but thanks for the lucky charms.
Mother, say your prayers

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